

Feminism: Demeaned by Association

by Ivy Bottini

Why should this Women's Commission care about lesbians? First, lesbians are women. Second, this Commission's goal is to "leave no woman behind" and we are all women in a male dominated and controlled society, women get left behind a lot. Third, it is imperative that heterosexual women understand how the label lesbian is used to control them.

A lesbian is a woman who, probably in her very early years, finds herself in conflict with society's rigid and confining "feminine" and "masculine" roles. She struggles to have her own identity and inner drive, to be a free person. As the lesbian woman grows up she finds herself unable to relate to society's definition of 'a real woman'. She discovers that in order to be considered "a real woman" she must be what society demands, she must be attached to a male, be under the protection of the male from attack from other males and, of course, have sex with him. For the lesbian who has spent her growing up years asserting her independence this submission is an impossible requirement.

Many older lesbians.....(I forgot the rest) The lesbian woman finds more and more, as she matures, that she not only rejects the sexualizing of women and the limiting nature of society's definition of a "real woman" but she begins to reject the women who accept those roles and the rigid parameters of their life. This scenario is exactly what the male dominated society has worked to create.

Lesbians and male homosexuals are used by society in different ways. The labels 'dyke' and 'faggot' are not just terms of derision they are used to point out that they are women and men who are not playing their socially prescribed sex roles in the patriarchal structure. If you ask someone to list the stereotype words to describe a lesbian or 'dyke' you will hear 'tough', 'butch', 'strong', 'masculine', 'independent', 'unattractive' and maybe even 'scary'. If you then ask someone to list the stereotype words to describe a gay male or 'faggot', you will hear 'sissy', 'weak', 'soft', 'feminine', 'pretty', and probably 'girlie'. The words used to describe a lesbian or 'dyke' are 'power full' words and they can also describe a male. And the words used to describe a gay man, or 'faggot' are very 'power less' words and can also be used to describe a woman.

The derogatory words and their intended targets are no mistake but rather the way the 'Man' has kept the patriarchy alive. The words that make up our language are not just used to communicate. Words are the control mechanism

that maintains the power in the patriarchal grasp.

I understand why, as a child growing up, I heard derogatory name calling. It was done to create fear and separateness and mistrust. It was used to control and keep people in their place. I grew up hearing 'wop', 'kike', 'nigger', 'Christ killers', 'potato eaters', 'spic', and other horrors. Those words began to be used when the targets were seen to be a challenge to the 'Man's' power structure. Growing up I never heard derogatory names for homosexuals until I was well into my 40's because up until then, homosexuals had "behaved," they had not challenged the status quo.

Homosexuals have been in the world for as far back as history is recorded. Only in modern times has society created derogatory names to target gays and lesbians. Up to that time we were mostly in the closet and women stayed in their prescribed gender roles. The Women's Suffrage movement was a glimmer of the hope to free women from their prison like roles, but ended after women won the, brutally fought for women's right to vote. After rumors and charges of lesbianism in the ranks of the Suffrage leadership the movement was broken. The fighters scurried home to their home and hearth. It would be forty years before women started the feminist-based Women's Liberation Movement and once again fought for the freedom of women and the end of discrimination towards them.

Initially all females start out wanting their own life, their own hopes and dreams, their own self identity, their own freedom. But the need for mandatory roles starts early. Little girls are thought to be so adorable in their pink crinoline-skirted dresses with satin bows in their hair. Before they are even out of elementary school they learn they must be pretty or the little boys won't like them. They can't be too loud or too good at sports or beat the boys in a race. But, if you are seen as a tomboy you can get away with excelling at most anything, at least for a little while.

When they are young, tomboys are thought to be 'cute' and acting like Daddy. The little girls in pink dresses grow up to be pretty ladies in pink dresses but the tomboys are told to "get out of those clothes and go put on a skirt and blouse, you want the boys to like you, don't you"? The begrudging admiration given to tomboys gives way to queasiness as the tomboy grows older and is seen as not playing their assigned sex roles.

Lesbian is the word that keeps women in line. When a woman hears the word lesbian aimed at her in relation to her actions, or stated dreams, she knows she has breached some invisible line put there to keep her out of the male's domain. If she has bought the whole "feminine" and "real woman" role, she will hustle back to her territory of house and home and not try for that promotion or not go back to school to get a degree she has always wanted. She will rethink

her actions and put her needs aside and continue being a support for her 'Man'.

Older women recall that if they were successful and independent and did not center their lives on a man it was certain they heard the whispers, "she's not a real woman" and "she's not very feminine, maybe she's a lesbian".

The women of today still encounter the words and the whispers when they move out of their territory, try for that promotion that would normally go to a man, start their own business, compete with the 'Man' for work contracts, and have the role-shattering-ambition to be the boss or perhaps run for President of the United States. Hillary Rodham Clinton is the perfect example. She is strong, decisive and independent and now has the audacity to run for the Presidency. Rumors about her sexuality and suspected lesbianism have circulated for years. The rumors are the male dominated society's desperate attempt to control her and send her scurrying back to Bill and to be under his protection as the 'feminine' role demands.

It is imperative that both heterosexual women and lesbians understand how the lesbian is used as a pawn in the 'Man's' game of control and governorship of power and the need to maintain the sex roles.

Sexism is alive and well in today's society. There are many issues blocking women's desire for independence and freedom to be anything she wants to be and have her separate identity and not the identity imposed on her by society's gender sex roles.

I believe that lesbianism is the rock bottom base from which sexism gets its power. If fear of being called a lesbian is eradicated women can truly be free to be what they want, to live their dreams and compete against men. Women will no longer recoil and scurry back to living their prescribed female role when the label 'lesbian' is tossed their way. Once women reject how the game of control is played to keep women "in their place" and they no longer fear being called a lesbian, the game is over and women are truly free. When women are fearless the world changes for good.

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